REASONS OF THE HEART
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Psalm 14
Luke 16:19–31

"Fools say in their hearts,
'There is no God.'"
Psalm 14:1 (NRSV)

The dilemma for many people today is not uncertainty as to whether God exists.
Polls continue to show that a large percentage of people in North America believe in a "higher power." There is also considerable evidence in contemporary culture and in the churches that people believe there is a mystery and transcendence in and beyond human experience.
But believing that there is a mystery is vastly different from believing that one's life, from beginning to end, is lived daily before God.
A God who is a remote mystery or impersonal transcendence may exist, but Christian faith presupposes not only God's existence and transcendence but also that people live before God and are accountable to one another because they are first accountable to God.

George W. Stroup
Before God

Dear God, you make yourself known to us in so many ways:
the beauty of the world, the love of our friends,
the great music of our faith, the words of scripture.
But often we are too busy, too distracted, to hear and see and know you.
So now startle us once again with your truth and your lively presence
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

"Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.'" Talk about being startled! That gets right to the heart of the matter! When I read the psalm for this Sunday—Psalm 14 with its memorable first verse—I remembered an item a friend e-mailed some time ago, which I read, chuckled about, and filed. The headline reads "God, Googled, Exists—59,000,000 Search Results Evidence of Deity, Experts Agree." The report announces that "in the most conclusive evidence of a Supreme Being ever discovered, a Google search of God has proved once and for all that he exists."

“To those doubters out there who still don’t believe that God exists, I have just one piece of advice: Google him,” said Dr. George Darlington of the University of Minnesota.” It’s satire, of course.

Apparently a twenty-two-year-old video store clerk made the discovery when he accidentally typed in “God” and discovered 59 million sites, a discovery that he believes will wipe out atheism worldwide.

The young man went on to discover that Satan only has three million sites, and that even Paris Hilton has more than that, leading to the conclusion that the hotel heiress has “eclipsed the Lord of Darkness as a force for evil.”

It is, of course, the basic question: Does God exist? Is God a reality that matters? One time a reporter asked Billy Graham how he knew there was a God, and Graham answered famously, “I know God exists because I talked to him this morning.”

Some might dismiss that as being too personal, too subjective, too experiential, not objective, not rational. How do you know? How do you analyze Billy Graham’s contention, measure it, critique it? And so some dismiss it and all personal experience as evidence of the reality of God. But not all. Hans Küng, the distinguished German theologian wrote an important book*, Does God Exist?* in which he asks the question and probes and analyzes all the answers philosophy and science have offered as well as the theologians—for 700 pages. And interestingly, at the beginning and end, Küng warns his readers and students about the limitations of human reason and invites us to remain open to a reality that transcends it. He cites that famous statement by the philosopher Pascal, a consummate rationalist, intellectual: “The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing; we know this in countless ways. . . . We know the truth not only through our reason but also through our heart”(*Does God Exist?,* p. 50). Reasons of the heart.

Ever since the Enlightenment there has been a great conversation in intellectual circles about this. But it is also, I think, a conversation that goes on at some level in every human heart. Is reality defined only by what we can rationally analyze, weigh, observe, and measure in a laboratory? Or is there more to it than that? Is there a reality bigger than and not always accessible to human reason? Can a person be rational, trust reason, practice a thoughtful approach to all of life, including religion—as opposed to taking an emotional, irrational approach—and at the same time believe in God, a reality that transcends human reason?

Atheists, real atheists, say no. If you can't see it, weigh it, look at in a microscope or through a telescope, it doesn't exist. Mostly we hear about public atheists who want "under God" taken out of the Pledge of Allegiance and all mention of God erased from public documents or utterances. Ironically, courts and legislatures frequently decide to let well enough alone because when it comes right down to it, the phrase doesn't have much content for most people and is ultimately vague enough to be harmless.

For many people who cannot believe in God, the issue is evil and suffering. If there is a good and loving God, why is there suffering? Natalie Angier writes about science and religion and atheism, which she believes is where science leads. She remembers how at the age of eight, her family was in a terrible car accident, and her older brother was nearly killed. Her grandmother explained who was to blame. Not the driver, who was driving much too fast. No, the reason the station wagon flipped over and Joe was thrown out the back window was this: her father had stopped going to church the previous year and God was very, very angry. That, she says, was the end of it, as far as God was concerned (*New York Times Book Review*, 5 September 2004).

Sometimes atheists can be as simplistic and unquestioning in their beliefs as any fundamentalist. Natalie Angier is genuinely surprised to encounter a scientist who believes in God. And yet today it is the scientific community that is reminding us that we don't know everything, that in fact we don't know as much as we thought we knew a few years ago about the universe.

Physicist Neils Bohr, father of quantum mechanics, said that his own expansive worldview began when, as a child, he was gazing into a fish pond on his family's farm. He watched the fish swimming for hours on end and then, one day, realized with a start that the fish did not know they were being watched. The fish were unaware of any reality outside the pond. Bohr found himself wondering if humans were like the fish in this regard, living in an expansive universe, acted on by multiple dimensions of reality but aware only of their limited frame of reference. (See Thomas Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, p. 42.)

The Bible doesn't have much to say about the question. Jesus never once talked about the existence of God, and nowhere in the Bible is there an argument for God's existence. God is simply assumed in the Bible. But there is a lot about the nature of God and the behavioral, social, interpersonal, and political implications of believing in God. The Bible is mostly concerned about how human life is lived before God, with God, in relationship to God.

"Fools say in their heart, 'There is no God,'" the psalmist wrote, and the Old Testament scholars suggest that he wasn't talking about philosophic atheism but about practical atheism, living life as if there were no God who

mattered much, living autonomously as if we were on our own, not responsible to anyone or for anyone. That's foolishness; that's dangerous. As someone once said, "If there is no God, everything is permitted."

That seems to be the human problem in our time. Something like 95 percent of the people claim belief in God, but it doesn't seem to matter much. Theologian Douglas Hall writes, "It is easy enough to claim belief in God. But the question that must always be put is simply, Which God? What is your image of God in whom you claim belief? What kind of company does your God keep? What does your God ask of you, if anything?" Hall reminds us that when Christians say "God," they don't mean a philosophic concept but Jesus Christ and his cross (*The Cross in Our Context*, p. 76).

The nineteenth-century philosopher Feuerbach said that God is a projection, in reverse, of our own sense of failure and inadequacy. We are finite—we project an infinite; we are mortal—we project an immortal. Freud and Marx and Nietzsche built on that thesis, arguing that human beings create a God out of their own needs.

Douglas Hall goes in a different direction by observing that human beings have theorized endlessly about God, that "God is a thought natural to the human, an idea for which we have an almost innate capacity. . . . God does seem to come automatically into the heads of most human beings, even those who deny the reality" (p. 120).

Sometimes it is expressed as a wistfulness, a longing. Gian Carlo Menotti, composer, once said, "I don't believe in God any more, but I do miss him." And novelist Dana Tierney wrote an essay about envying her four-year-old son's faith. Tierney and her husband are nonbelievers, had their son, Luke, baptized, and never mentioned religion again. Then her husband, Luke's father, went to Iraq. Luke and his mother were watching television news one evening when a difficult report about the fighting in Iraq came on. She writes,

> Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Luke steeple his fingers and bow his head for a split second. Surprised, I said, "Sweetheart, what are you doing?" He wouldn't tell me, but a few minutes later he did it again. I said, "You don't have to tell me, but if you want to, I'm listening." Finally, he confessed, "I was saying a little prayer for Daddy."
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> "That's wonderful, Luke," I murmured, abashed that we, or our modern world, somehow made him embarrassed to pray for his father in his own home. It was as if the mustard seed of faith had found its way into our son. I was envious.

Later, she asked Luke when he started to believe in God. “I don’t know,” he said, “I’ve always known he existed.”

Luke’s daddy did come home safely. His mother reflects, “But if something did happen to his father, Luke would have known Dad was in heaven waiting for us. . . For Luke all things are possible. . . . Luke’s prayers can stretch to infinity and beyond, but I am limited to one: Help thou my unbelief”(*New York Times Magazine*, 11 January 2004).

That, by the way, is a prayer I believe God always hears. There are times when we find we can’t believe. There come days for all of us when all we experience of God is a silence, a distance, an absence, what Martin Buber a generation ago called “the eclipse of God.” There come to all of us times when God does not seem to be close at all, real at all. Jesus himself had a moment like that, when hanging on his cross, dying, he reached deeply into the sacred literature of his people and quoted Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” A person who has never doubted has probably not thought about it much, certainly hasn’t wrestled with the basic idea of God. I love the story of Martin Luther, who Martin Marty, in a new biography, calls God-obsessed, a wrestler with God. Luther had periods of dark despair all his life, when the only thing he knew about God was the silence. He once traveled over the Alps from Germany to Rome to represent his monastic order and hoped to have his faith renewed and assured by seeing all the relics and visiting all the sacred sites. On his knees, climbing up the sacred stairs that Jesus himself was said to have climbed on his way to the cross, stairs worn down by the knees of millions of pilgrims, Luther wrote later that he found himself thinking, “What if it isn’t true?”

Doubt, struggle, intellectual argument is part of faith. It is an integral part of the Presbyterian tradition to encourage the intellectual struggle, to think and think hard about God. It is an integral part of the tradition not to deposit your mind at the church door but to bring it inside, to use it in here. It is an integral part of the tradition to question, never to fear the question, the dialogue, the argument.

But is also, finally, a matter of head and heart. Some of the best advice I’ve ever been given was to have the courage and integrity to doubt, to understand that doubt is part of honest faith, but also to have the courage and integrity to doubt my own doubts. Doubt—but doubt your doubts.

We have never been able not to think about God it seems. In our anxiety to pin it down, we come up with words—treatises, theological systems, and creeds. “God is the Supreme Being, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, immutable, infinite, absolute, ultimate, prime mover, first cause, etc., etc.,” and in so doing, we can actually dispense with the mystery, the holiness, and the unknowingness of God”(Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*).

And so the invitation is to exercise your brain, your reason, your God-given intellect about all things, but especially about this. And the invitation is also to listen to your heart.

Diane Komp is a pediatric oncologist who wrote a book about the critically ill children she treats. She says she used to be a pragmatic, post-Christian agnostic. Dr. Komp was treating a little girl named Anna for leukemia back in the days when the recovery rate was not nearly as high as it is today. Things were not going well. The end was near. At Anna's side were her parents, the hospital chaplain, who, Diane Komp recalls, favored psychology over theology, and Dr. Komp herself. She writes, "Before she died, Anna mustered the final energy to sit up in her hospital bed and say: 'The angels —they're so beautiful. Mommy, can you see them? Do you hear them singing? They're so beautiful, Mommy.' And then she lay back on her pillow and died."

Dr. Komp remembers that Anna's parents reacted as if they had been given the most precious gift in the world. The chaplain quickly left the room, leaving agnostic Komp alone with a grieving Christian family. She reflects, "Together we contemplated a spiritual mystery that transcended our understanding and experience. For weeks to follow, the thought that stuck in my head was: Have I found a reliable witness?" (Cited by Thomas Long, *Testimony Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, p. 58).

That is why we come here, I believe: To experience the witness of history. To join our voices, our spirits, our minds, our hearts in an affirmation none of us can adequately explain or totally understand. When I am away, I cannot wait to get back here on Sunday morning to take my place in that long line of people who have chosen to believe and who, even when they were struggling and doubting and having trouble believing, decided to take the leap of faith and pray and praise and worship and put their lives back in the balancing context of eternity.

At the end of his monumental book, the very last paragraph, Hans Küng writes

> Does God exist? Despite all upheavals and doubts, the only appropriate answer must be that with which believers of all generations from ancient times have again and again professed their faith. It begins with faith: Te Deum Laudamus—You God, we praise. And ends in trust: In you, O Lord, I trust."

You, O Lord, I trust with my life, the lives of my dear ones; you, O Lord, I trust with all the days ahead.

“The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing; we know this in countless ways.”

Reasons of the heart.

Amen.